

THE HOUSE OF ASTOR



VINCENT
ASTOR.

By F. CUNLIFFE-OWEN.

VINCENT ASTOR displayed in spite of his youth so much delicacy and tact in his relations with his parents at the time of the dissolution of their marriage and showed such sincere grief when his father so gallantly gave his life for others on the occasion of the founding of the Titanic that it seemed to many as if an injustice had been committed by Col. Astor when he left his town house at 820 Fifth avenue to his widow for life, or until her remarriage, instead of to his firstborn.

In spite of all American professions of democracy and denunciations of the system of caste and of class distinctions abroad, New York and some other great cities of the United States are becoming endowed with patricians, untitled, it is true, yet nevertheless patricians, based mainly on birth and ancestry, but into which the possession of great wealth in the third and sometimes even in the second generation often constitutes an open sesame. It is a patriciate that finds its expression, among other ways, in patriotic organizations, such as the Orders of the Cincinnati, of the Sons of the Revolution, etc., and also in clubs, such as, for instance, that of St. Nicholas, in New York, in which certain genealogical qualifications are essential to admission.

In this patriciate primogeniture, which is one of the foundations of the democracy in the Old World, has very quietly taken its place without arousing any protest or opposition as contrary to the principles of true republicanism. And it has been to such an extent accepted as perfectly right and proper by the American people that they are apt to criticize and to give voice to their displeasure when some well known figure in society discriminates in his testamentary dispositions against his firstborn in favor of a younger son.

This is why the people of New York were inclined to resent the idea that the Astor family mansion on upper Fifth avenue should be assigned, by Col. Astor to the use of his second wife, the former Madeline Force of Brooklyn, with the bar to whom she gave birth after a few months of widow-

hood, while his eldest son, Vincent, the head of the American branch of the house of Astor, was reduced to make his home when in the city in furnished residences rented for the season. It is therefore with satisfaction that the public learned last summer that owing to the remarriage of John Jacob Astor's widow to William K. Dick the Astor family mansion had under the terms of Col. Astor's will come into the possession of Vincent Astor. He is to take up his abode there with his young wife during the coming week. When he enters its portals he will carry with him the good wishes of many of his fellow citizens, including friends of his still beautiful mother and of his wonderful old grandmother, the late Mrs. William Astor, and even the good wishes of perfect strangers, who somehow or other feel a sort of satisfaction that fate has now repaired what was regarded as an injustice.

During the last three months the house has undergone extensive repairs and redecoration, and it is intimated that during the coming winter it will be the scene of much gaiety and hospitality. Indeed, the hope is expressed that in course of time it may once more become the species of hub and headquarters of society that it was in the days of the late Mrs. William Astor, the last of its acknowledged leaders, and I might almost say autocrat.

True, Mrs. Vincent Astor is still very young, a mere girl in fact. But she has many qualities that may enable her by degrees to revive the quiet authority exercised for so many years in the New York world of fashion by the late Mrs. William Astor. Mrs. Vincent Astor has the perfect poise, the delicate tact and quiet assurance that come from birth and breeding, rather than from education or experience. She is without any trace of pose or affectation.

Entirely unobtrusive in her pleasant manner, she is, as is natural in a young matron of such lineage, strongly averse to everything that savors even in the slightest degree of vulgar ostentation. She conveys the impression of being in no way hardened by any sense of the colossal character of the Astor fortune. Her parents were rich enough to satisfy any whims or caprices which she may have entertained as a young girl, and if she gave her hand to Vincent Astor and consented to become his wife it was not because he was the greatest prize of his day in the matrimonial market

but because they had been friends and playmates and neighbors from their earliest childhood.

The fact that they were thoroughly acquainted long beforehand with their respective tastes and character indicated that their union was based not merely on love and affection, but also on mutual sympathy. They were not required to learn to know each other after plighting their troth at the altar, as is so often the case; and the fact that in spite of their youth they are such old friends and chums gives plenty of promise that their marriage will prove a very happy one in every respect.

In some respects the reign of Mrs. Vincent Astor, who now as wife of the head of the only American branch of the Astor family has become "the" Mrs. Astor, is likely to prove even more brilliant than that of her husband's celebrated grandmother, who was "Aunt Carrie" to all that was best born in New York society. For the late Mrs. Astor had only half of the mansion at 820 Fifth avenue for her entertainments and hospitalities, whereas the entire building is now at the disposal of the young chateau, the two adjoining houses having been transformed into one of the stateliest residences that face the east side of Central Park.

It is a mansion which, despite the modernity of its construction, suggests conservatism and the possession of wealth, not newly acquired, but inherited from several generations of ancestors. There is a certain amount of sobriety in the luxury displayed; nothing that offends the eye by even a suspicion of ostentation; while the feature, of course, of the mansion is the ballroom, in the style of the French Renaissance, which is also a gallery of beautiful paintings, mainly of the French school, such as pictures by Jules Breton, by Troyon and by LeFebvre. Above the mantel is a superb masterpiece by Van Dyke.

Although the mansion is comparatively new, yet it is full of traditions of the late Mrs. William Astor, and it will be interesting to observe during the next few years the manner in which they will be lived up to by her granddaughter-in-law, the present Mrs. Astor. The traditions were connected with the social reign of the late Mrs. Astor.

In the early days of her marriage there were a few other women associated with her in the social society here, the sway of which was undisputed as that of the famous



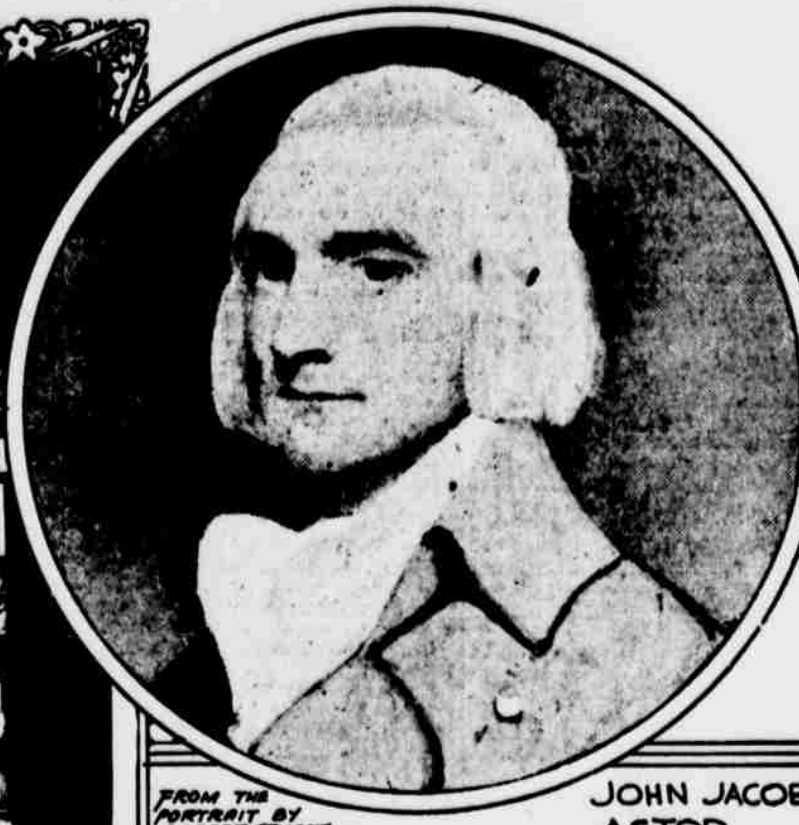
THE ASTOR HOME ON
FIFTH AVE.



BARON
ASTOR



MRS.
WILLIAM
ASTOR
FROM MINIATURE
BY J. A. COUDERT



JOHN JACOB
ASTOR
THE FIRST.

of this opportunity to point out to her granddaughters-in-law and successors at 820 Fifth avenue that it was wielded in a White rather than in a Tory fashion. For while on the one hand she was extremely conservative and averse to any startling innovations and departures from what constituted in her eyes the laws of good form, of refined taste and of breeding she nevertheless appreciated the fact that here, as in the Old World, it is necessary that society should keep abreast of the times, and that it occasionally requires the infusion of new blood in order to endow it with the strength and vigor necessary to play a useful role in the commonwealth.

In Great Britain and in other monarchial countries of Europe the crown, with the approval of the people, is constantly adding to the nobility through the bestowal of titles upon men who have achieved eminence in the realms of industry and of commerce, or who have distinguished themselves by services to the nation as soldiers, as naval commanders and as statesmen. In this way the aristocracy is continually being recruited from outside, in such a manner that it remains an active factor in public and social life abroad.

The late Mrs. Astor realized this, and instead of maintaining the barriers of the New York world of fashion against people who were the creators of their own fortune, she made it her business, from a series of duty rather than of taste, to facilitate the entrance into society here of men and women who in addition to recently acquired wealth possessed culture and refinement, and consequently appeared to her as destined to prove valuable acquisitions to the world over which she ruled.

Many indeed are the men and women now occupying positions in the very front rank of New York society who are indebted for their present position wholly and entirely to the late Mrs. Astor. Some of them are disposed to forget this. Young Mrs. Astor's restoration of the family mansion into a social center may serve to recall the fact to them.

It is no exaggeration to assert that for well nigh half a century the threshold of the mansion of the late Mrs.

forward as best qualified to assume the place of the late lamented Ward McAllister, wrongly described as the center of fashion. But Ward McAllister was nothing of the sort, nothing more, indeed, than the adviser and the executor of the commands of that inner circle of patronesses or matrones to whom reference has been made above and of whom the venerable Mrs. Martin Livingston is now the only survivor.

No mere man can fill the post of ruler of society, at any rate in New York. In England Edward VII. was able to wield a supremacy of this kind because he was the anointed sovereign of the mightiest empire of the globe, whose sway extended over one-fifth of the entire human race, and whose favor or prejudice could make or mar the position of any man or woman in his dominions. But in New York the assumption of authority by any one man would be resented and derided by the others, though they would be perfectly content to bow to social authority when wielded by a woman or an association of women.

It was considered probable that after the disappearance from the scene of the late Mrs. Astor some of the most conservative women in the vanguard of the New York world of fashion, such as, for instance, Mrs. Ogden Mills, Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, senior and junior, Mrs. Marshall Orme Wilson and a few others, would, sinking all personal rivalries and prejudices, assemble together and unite in the formation of a sort of board of control similar to that of the lady patronesses of Almack's in London in the reign of George IV. and of the patronesses of the New York Assembly of half a century ago in New York. But these anticipations were not realized.

It has been argued that New York has become too big for anything of the kind, and that society is now divided into too many independent cliques, that nearly all of these, though they may be unwilling to admit it, take their own room and follow the lead of those whom they believe to constitute the "grit" of the cream of the grand monde, and that is precisely why it has become necessary to reestablish an acknowledged leadership on the part of one or more matrons alive to their obligations and the responsibility of maintaining a conservative and restraining influence upon what is known as New York society.

The late Mrs. Astor's influence was very great, and I would avail myself

Council of Ten which play so important a role in the history of the Republic of Venice. As in the case of the Council controlling the destinies of the queen of the Adriatic, so in this city was the rule of the late Mrs. Astor and of the matrons associated with her in the direction of the destinies of New York society of a distinctly oligarchic character.

Possessed of unrivaled experience, of sound judgment, of tact and of savoir faire, besides commanding considerable wealth, as well as those ancestral qualifications which seem to carry almost as much weight in all republics as in monarchies, their authority was as unquestioned as that of Lady Jersey, Lady Castlereagh, Lady Sefton and Princess Lieven in London in the days when the profligacies of George IV. and the queer domestic arrangements of his successor, William IV., precluded the Court of St. James' from exercising any restraint over the English great world and rendered imperative the establishment in its stead of some power such as that of the autocratic patronesses of Almack's.

For society, no matter whether it be in London or in Paris, in New York or elsewhere in the United States, stands in need of recognized leadership and direction to maintain a conservative and restraining influence so as to prevent it from going astray. The duties and obligations in connection with the exercise of an authority of this kind are very heavy and exacting in their nature, and the death of several of the principal fellow matrons of the late Mrs. Astor and the withdrawal from the scene of the others had the result of leaving her virtually alone in the field.

Placed in an altogether preeminent position for the task, the late Mrs. Astor may be said to have entered into her hands the reins of power, which she retained until a year or so before her death. After a last great ball at 820 Fifth avenue—her swan song—she was compelled by the proximity of advanced age and the complete breakdown of her health to lay down the scepter.

Thus far that scepter has never been taken up. Several names have been mentioned since then in connection with the succession of her leadership and some even recommended that the direction of society should be entrusted to the late Frederick Townsend Martin, who was put



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HEVER CASTLE, THE HOME OF BARON ASTOR



COL. JOHN
JACOB ASTOR



MRS. WILLIAM
K. DICK